

Beginnings of Community

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First Lesson: *Exodus* 16: 1-15

Second Lesson: *John* 21: 1-14

There are no sermons at St. John's College—except this one. And it is fitting that it should come when our programs of study are complete. Hearing it should be optional, as must be the case in an important sense even for mandatory sermons.

The Baccalaureate service is an historical remnant, a reminder of the long and varied history of our college. It is a reminder that we occupy only the fleeting present. We take for granted the continuity of our institution. The practices and convictions of our forefathers may strike us as quaint, but our ways—often considerably more severe than theirs—would surely have surprised them.

One of our persisting institutional preoccupations is concern for the health of our college as a community. The discussion often takes the form of a lament that our life together is not all that it might be. In our darkest moments we wonder if we are much of a community at all. At least in a superficial way we do constitute a community—after all we work and live together, attend classes, meetings, meals and functions together. But our life as a community is disappointing in many important ways: We complain of a discontinuity between life in the classroom and life in the dormitories. The ideal of a wholesome well ordered life for students runs frequently up against the ideal of individual liberty. Our sense of intellectual community can also become strained. What at its best is a shared program of study can suffer under partisan and factional tension. Our principle of radical inquiry when turned upon itself can yield odd, frightening results, and yet as an honest touchstone for truth seeking, in a world of divergent, often extravagant claims, it is the best we have. Taken all together our experience of community often seems fragmentary. At times we seem to have little in common beyond submitting ourselves to a unified program of study and to an institutional posture of mild skepticism.

And yet, such a dark view of our life together seems to overstate the case.

We have just heard John's story of the final appearance of Jesus to his disciples. Something here might throw some light on our problem of community. The *Gospel of John* comes along in our academic program, as one more book to be read, chewed, and at least partially digested in a single class discussion. Our standard philosophical approach—to ask, "what claims does this author make and what arguments can we find to support them?"—serves us quite well with much of what we read. But this standard approach

comes up oddly short with books like John's Gospel. We must cast about for a way of reading it, a way of listening to it, a way of engaging it that will not entirely miss its point. This is no easy matter, and the stakes are very high: Ironically the very issue of how to read this book about self-denial, peace and brotherly love has been a major source of war and death for two thousand years.

Jesus said to them, "come, have breakfast." and none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they realized it was the Lord. Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish.

At times it seems that the evangelists speak directly, that their message is unmistakable and clear. Yet we are constantly presented with the example of those whom Jesus addresses during his life who are reported as flatly not understanding or misunderstanding what is most important in his words. Even the twelve themselves more often than not are said at best only faintly to grasp what he intends. The lesson here, unless we consider ourselves divinely gifted readers and interpreters of the word—which I do not—is to tread softly, asking more than proclaiming, seeking rather than insisting, knocking, rather than letting ourselves in.

One of the wonderful features of the Gospels is that so little connective tissue is provided to make sense for us of the fecund details of the stories. We are left to supply the connective tissue ourselves, thus the richness of possible interpretation and at the same time the ground for doctrinal dispute. Much has been made of the fact that Jesus uses his last appearance to Peter, John, and the others to fill their nets with fish—one hundred and fifty three, to be exact—and to provide a meal for them. We can readily see how this passage might suggest the "fishing of men" and the founding of a church. But the story also makes immediate or common sense, and this sense may turn out to be more fundamentally Christian than justifying the building of many churches. It is very much in character for Jesus to act both as provider and as a host at shared meals. The attention granted here to meals taken in common suggests something important and easily missed about the interest of Jesus in community.

Now community is one of those good words like *repentance* and *salvation* and *righteousness* and *love* that have developed a specific church usage. In exchange for that, oddly enough, they have lost much of their common sense. Such is the price of a specialized and hallowed vocabulary. The word *community* suggests that people live together sharing all in common. The *Acts of the Apostles* and later Christian writings emphasize the wholeness of life in community. We, too, like to think of ourselves at St. John's College as constituting a community of sorts, albeit a community based on shared inquiry rather than shared religious conviction. Such a notion of the *wholeness* of community is a logical development for us as it was for the church fathers. But our failure to live up to an all inclusive conception of community is also the source of much unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The goal of such a comprehensive community may be beyond us in any but an ideal world. And it is here, I think, that the example of Jesus may offer some light.

We find Jesus characteristically at the very *beginning* of human sharing. And though he may be truly present in a number of senses, I would like to focus on that sense in which he is present in spirit as soon as two or three are gathered together preparing fish, breaking bread, sharing wine. It is significant that so often in the accounts of the appearances of Jesus after the crucifixion that the disciples, οἱ μαθηταί, with whom he has spent many long days, fail to recognize him for quite some time: "When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus." It is only after he instructs them to cast their net "over the right side of the boat," and then it is only one of them who recognizes him. It seems clear that the recognition that is most important here is not the physical features of Jesus, but rather whatever it is about his memory that inspires the confidence to set your net once again after a whole night of futile effort. The mystery here to be considered is what it is about Jesus or the memory of Jesus that inspires confidence (πίστις in Greek) that makes it possible for them to work with the expectation (ἐλπίς) that their daily bread somehow will be provided, and to engage in the mutual trust and concern for one another (ἀγάπη) that the thought of Jesus makes possible. The scene ends with the image of Jesus breaking and distributing the loaves and fishes—the necessary means of human physical sustenance, which may easily be taken as the emblems of more profoundly human spiritual sustenance.

Luke's Gospel in the twenty-fourth chapter recounts another appearance of Jesus to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. "And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them." Again, "their eyes were prevented from recognizing him." He walks with them for a considerable time, discussing with them the crucifixion and its relation to the scriptures. It is only after they have invited him, a stranger, to stay the night with them, and he breaks bread with them, that "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." Here, too, the appearance of Jesus has little to do with their recognizing his physical look. They realize his presence only when they have shared a meal and this time also conversation about the most important spiritual matters.

We find Jesus characteristically at the very beginning moments of community when the disciples are able to put aside their defenses and work together in mutual trust, if only for the brief time of a meal, the shared work of harvesting a net-full of fish—more than any one person can manage on his own, and perhaps, in the activity that constitutes the bread of the intellectual life, conversation seeking enlightenment.

Entertaining an ideal of a comprehensive community, where all aspects of life and work are harmonized can surely be useful, but setting such comprehensive unity as an essential goal may turn out to be a mere phantom of reason. But if we cannot expect to live in continual and comprehensive communal harmony, we should nonetheless practice treasuring those rather frequent moments I would call beginnings of community, when, if only briefly, we engage in our common work with concern for one another, or at least without inordinate concern for ourselves. We may be able to manage this only for an hour or two from time to time, as when we are able to see into a deep idea or poetic image. It

may happen around a classroom table or at a shared meal where food and drink are the occasion of more than bodily nourishment.

The sign of a thriving community may not be the success of grand strategies for overarching communal structures. The sign of a vital community may be the actual occurrence and the ongoing openness to those moments of beginning, hopeful moments when thorough going harmony is actual and immediate, and when its sustenance and growth seem possible. These treasurable moments of shared community both in themselves and as they live in memory may be as much as we dare to hope for in this world. We must remember that these moments are a manna, a *daily* bread, given to us only one day at a time.

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land through the midst of the sea.¹ ²⁰The prophetess Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, while all the women went out after her with tambourines, dancing;²¹ and she led them* in the refrain:

Sing to the LORD, for he is gloriously triumphant;
horse and chariot he has cast into the sea.^m

²²At Marah and Elim. ²² Then Moses led Israel forward from the Red Sea, and they marched out to the desert of Shur. After traveling for three days through the desert without finding water, ²³they arrived at Marah, where they could not drink the water, because it was too bitter. Hence this place was called Marah. ²⁴As the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" ²⁵he appealed to the LORD, who pointed out to him a certain piece of wood. When he threw this into the water, the water became fresh.^o

It was here that the LORD, in making rules and regulations for them, put them to the test. ²⁶"If you really listen to the voice of the LORD, your God," he told them, "and do what is right in his eyes: if you heed his commandments and keep all his precepts, I will not afflict you with any of the diseases with which I afflicted the Egyptians;^p for I, the LORD, am your healer."

²⁷Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.^q

CHAPTER 16

The Desert of Sin. ¹Having set out from Elim, the whole Israelite community came into the desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month* after their departure from the land of Egypt. ²Here in the desert the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³The Israelites said to them, "Would that we had died at the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you had to lead us into this desert to make the whole community die of famine!"

The Quail and Manna. ⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will now rain down bread from heaven* for you. Each day the people are to go out and gather their daily

portion; thus will I test them, to see whether they follow my instructions or not.⁵ On the sixth day, however, when they prepare what they bring in, let it be twice as much as they gather on the other days.⁶ So Moses and Aaron told all the Israelites "At evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt; ⁷and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, as he heeds your grumbling against him.⁸ But what are we that you should grumble against us?⁹ When the LORD gives you flesh to eat in the evening," continued Moses, "and in the morning your fill of bread, as he heeds the grumbling you utter against him, what then are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD."

⁹Then Moses said to Aaron, "Tell the whole Israelite community: Present yourselves before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling."¹⁰ When Aaron announced this to the whole Israelite community, they turned toward the desert, and lo, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud! ¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹²"I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them: In the evening twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread, so that you may know that I, the LORD, am your God."

¹³In the evening quail^r came up and covered the camp. In the morning a dew lay all about the camp, ¹⁴and when the dew evaporated, there on the surface of the desert were fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground. ¹⁵On seeing it, the Israelites asked one another, "What is this?"* for they did not know what it was. But Moses told them

"This is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat."

¹ Cor 10, 3; ² ³ ⁴ ⁵ ⁶ ⁷ ⁸ ⁹ ¹⁰ ¹¹ ¹² ¹³ ¹⁴ ¹⁵ ¹⁶ ¹⁷ ¹⁸ ¹⁹ ²⁰ ²¹ ²² ²³ ²⁴ ²⁵ ²⁶ ²⁷ ²⁸ ²⁹ ³⁰ ³¹ ³² ³³ ³⁴ ³⁵ ³⁶ ³⁷ ³⁸ ³⁹ ⁴⁰ ⁴¹ ⁴² ⁴³ ⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ ⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ ⁵¹ ⁵² ⁵³ ⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ ⁵⁶ ⁵⁷ ⁵⁸ ⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ ⁶¹ ⁶² ⁶³ ⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ ⁶⁶ ⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ ⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ ⁷¹ ⁷² ⁷³ ⁷⁴ ⁷⁵ ⁷⁶ ⁷⁷ ⁷⁸ ⁷⁹ ⁸⁰ ⁸¹ ⁸² ⁸³ ⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ ⁸⁶ ⁸⁷ ⁸⁸ ⁸⁹ ⁹⁰ ⁹¹ ⁹² ⁹³ ⁹⁴ ⁹⁵ ⁹⁶ ⁹⁷ ⁹⁸ ⁹⁹ ¹⁰⁰

15, 21: *She led them*: Miriam's refrain re-echoes the first verse of this song and was probably sung as an antiphon after each verse.

16, 1: *On the fifteenth day of the second month*: just on full month after their departure from Egypt. Cf Ex 12, 2, 51; Nr 33, 3f. They encamped in the desert of Sin on a Friday; the murmuring (vv 2f) occurred on the sabbath, the arrival of the quail (v 13) the evening before Sunday, followed by six mornings (vv 14-27) of collecting manna before the next sabbath.

16, 4: *Bread from heaven*: as a gift from God, the manna said to come down from the sky. Cf Ps 78, 25; Wis 16, 20. Perhaps it was similar to a natural substance that is still found in small quantities on the Sinai peninsula, but here it is, at least in particular, miraculously. Our Lord referred to the manna as a type of the Blessed Eucharist. Cf Jn 6, 32, 49-52.

16, 15: *What is this*: the original *man hu* is thus rendered by the ancient versions, which understood the phrase as a popular etymology of the Hebrew word *man*, "manna"; some render: "This is manna."

Lord and my God!"* ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me?" Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."*

Conclusion.* ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of [his] disciples that are not written in this book.^o ³¹ But these are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.*

IV. EPILOGUE

THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCE IN GALILEE

CHAPTER 21

The Appearance to the Seven Disciples.

¹ * After this, Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed himself in this way.^v ² Together were Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons,* and two others of his disciples. ³ * Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We also will come with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.* ⁴ When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.* ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They

answered him, "No."* ⁶ So he said to them, "Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something." So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish. ⁷ So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad, and jumped into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish. ⁹ * When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread.* ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three* large fish. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn.* ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come, have breakfast." And none of the disciples dared to ask him,* "Who are you?" because they realized it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish.* ¹⁴ This was now the third time/ Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead.*



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